

"The Hairy Lady Lucy"

By FOXCROFT DAVIS

PART VIII

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CHAPTER VIII.

In Washington there is always an outbreak of gayer after Easter. It is then that the results of the season are tabulated, and the coming June wedding announced. Two such announcements were made which surprised society—that of Sir Percy Carlyon, first secretary of the British Embassy, and Miss Lucy Armistage, whose name most of the smart set heard for the first time, and that of Senator March to Mrs. Vernon, the charming Englishwoman, who had been received with open arms by the smartest of the smart. The first was the surprising in the effect it produced. The British Embassy, and all that belongs to it, is reckoned the peculiar property of the smart set, and for any one attached to that embassy to go outside of the smart set for a bride seemed almost a violation of international law, to say nothing of diplomatic usage. Every particular about Miss Armistage, as the facts came to light, was more appalling; she was from a provincial Kentucky town, of which nobly, outside of Kentucky, had ever heard; she was the niece of a Representative in Congress, who lived in a downy house, and had never been to Europe and Newport and Lenox were unknown to her. Almost the only fashionable house at which she had ever been seen was that of the Chantreys, and society had, from the beginning, bestowed Eleanor Chantrey's hand upon Sir Percy Carlyon.

Deep in Eleanor's heart was a disappointed dream of ambition. She had herself too well in hand to fall in love with Sir Percy Carlyon, or any other man, until her love had been asked, but his eligibility had been suggested to her a great many times, chiefly by Mrs. Chantrey, who had visions of possessing the British Embassy, body and bones; herself the ambassador, her daughter the wife of the first secretary. Some hint of this Mrs. Chantrey let drop to Eleanor when they sat together at tea in Eleanor's yellow boudoir on the day that Sir Percy Carlyon's engagement was announced. There are ways by which a daughter, as perfectly well bred as Eleanor Chantrey, can silence a garrulous mother, and this is what Eleanor did.

"We must go this afternoon," she said calmly, "and call on Miss Armistage. I think her charming girl, quite clever enough to fill any position whatever." Mrs. Chantrey being civilly bullied by her daughter, the two drove down later to the Armistages' hotel, and instead of merely leaving cards, waited to know whether they could see Mrs. and Miss Armistage. They were ushered up into the modest sitting-room, which had been the scene of some halcyon hours to Lucy and Sir Percy Carlyon.

Eleanor Chantrey, the most sincere of women, honestly admired Lucy Armistage, and the quiet dignity and grace with which Lucy received her congratulations confirmed Eleanor in her previous opinion, that Lucy Armistage would be equal to any position. She thanked Eleanor warmly for her good wishes and interest, and the two girls were drawn closer together by the innate nobility which both of them possessed.

Meanwhile, Sir Percy was having what might be called a "rough time" at the embassy with Lord Baudesert, his Aunt Susan, and Jane, Sarah, and Isabella. Sometimes even sheep will make a feat of butting, and, following Lord Baudesert's tigerish assault, the Verekeres butted and prodded as viciously as they knew how. Sir Percy had chosen tea-time as the hour to break the news to his family. He first had a private interview with Lord Baudesert in his library. The ambassador happened to have a real and not a diplomatic touch of gout, and was correspondingly savage. When Sir Percy coolly, and without any preamble, announced that he was engaged to Miss Armistage, and that the wedding would take place at Bardston, Ky., in the middle of June, Lord Baudesert almost jumped from his chair with wrath and surprise, and then fell back again overwhelmed with disgust.

"You swore to me," he growled, "that you would never marry an American." Sir Percy grinned and stroked his mustache.

"Well," he said, "I am of that opinion still. This is the only American I would ever marry under any circumstances, and I don't propose to do it but once."

"You know the disadvantages of it," cried Lord Baudesert, thumping the table: "her money will be tied up as tight as wax; you will have a trail of relations following you all over Europe, and the whole thing is the most damnable mess I have ever heard of in my life."

"Call it anything you please," replied Sir Percy, still smiling, "but I am careful how you mention Miss Armistage. As for her money being tied up, she has very little, so it really doesn't matter."

This was like throwing a bushel of dynamite into a burning house. Lord Baudesert forgot his gout and, getting up from his chair, strode up and down the room, dragging his gouty leg after him and muttering savagely to himself, with an occasional blast against American marriages. Presently Sir Percy returned and went into the drawing-room, followed by Lord Baudesert. There sat Mrs. Vereker and the three girls, and while Mrs. Vereker was handing Sir Percy his tea he remarked casually to her:

"Aunt Susan, I hope very much that you and the girls will, as soon as you conveniently can, call upon Miss Armistage, who has done me the honor of promising to become my wife."

If the big chamberlain in the middle of the room had tumbled over the tea table, and had been followed by a patch of the blue sky, Mrs. Vereker could not have been more astounded; her jaw dropped, and the three girls, horror-stricken, gazed at Sir Percy, who went on drinking his tea with the most exasperating calmness.

"Engaged to Miss Armistage," murmured Mrs. Vereker, despairingly, when she found her voice. "A most incredible thing! I think you must be joking, and that you are really engaged to Miss Chantrey."

"I assure you that I am not," replied Sir Percy. "Give me another cup of tea, please, Isabella."

"Mamma," said Isabella, without paying the slightest attention to Sir Percy's request, "he is simply teasing you. He certainly is engaged to Miss Chantrey. I have heard it suggested a dozen times in the last month."

"But I am not," said Sir Percy, helping himself to tea, which no one else was sufficiently composed to give him.

Mrs. Vereker shook her head hopelessly. "I am sure it is Miss Chantrey."

This view of the matter acted upon Lord Baudesert's smoldering rage like a

stone in front of a rushing railway train, which in a once derelict and helpless, Lord Baudesert exploded into a short laugh.

"No such luck," he said; "Miss Chantrey has a fortune; Miss Armistage has not."

Sir Percy, having finished his tea, put down his cup and rose.

"I shall be very much obliged to you, Aunt Susan, if you will do as I ask, Lord Baudesert, of course, will call to-morrow."

Lord Baudesert growled something between his clenched teeth, which nobody could make out, and Sarah cried:

"Oh, Cousin Percy, how many times have I heard you say that you would never marry an American," and Jane chimed in, "No one would have minded in the least if it had been Eleanor Chantrey."

"Perhaps," remarked Sir Percy to Jane, "meanwhile looking Lord Baudesert full in the eye, 'you may yet have the pleasure of being allied with the Chantreys. Common report has it that Lord Baudesert and Mrs. Chantrey are to be married shortly. Good afternoon.' And leaving this bomb behind him he escaped into the street."

Only to one other did he feel the necessity of imparting the news himself. This was to Gen. Talbott, and through him to Alicia Vernon. He walked to their hotel and was shown to their sitting room to wait the return from a drive. He went to the window and looked down on the street embowered with trees, and with sidewalks full of gayly-dressed people, and smart carriages dashing to and fro in the sunny spring afternoon. He had heard that day, as had everybody else, the announcement of Alicia Vernon's engagement, and it brought him no surprise, but only that strange feeling as if such a thing could not be, that Alicia Vernon should become the wife of an honorable man. While he was watching, the carriage with Gen. Talbott and Alicia drove up, and the general, with his own portly grace, assisted his daughter to alight in a moment or two they entered the room together, and Gen. Talbott grasped Sir Percy's hand, and congratulated him from the bottom of an honest and generous heart.

"We, too, have news for you," he said, smiling. "I will leave it to Alicia to tell you, as it is her affair."

Alicia fixed her violet eyes on Sir Percy Carlyon, and in them was the light of triumph.

"I think, papa," she said, in the sweet, amiable voice which she always addressed her father, "if you will leave me with Sir Percy for ten minutes it would be kind. I want to tell so old a friend all about it. So here is your newspaper, and give me your own room for ten minutes, and then we shall be delighted to see you."

She took the afternoon newspaper off the table, and thrusting it into Gen. Talbott's hand, with an air of tender familiarity, led him to the door and closed it after him, and then she came back to where Sir Percy stood near the window and began to pull off her long gloves.

"Have you told Miss Armistage about this summer at the hill station?" she asked calmly, with a sidelong glance. Sir Percy remained silent, but it won for him no mercy. "I see that you haven't," she said. "Yet you think it right to marry an innocent girl without telling her. Very well, I shall marry Senator March, but neither shall I tell him all."

It occurred to Sir Percy to ask her if she meant, like himself, to be so true, so devoted in her marriage with the man who had some little ground upon which to take advantage. But although he by no means adopted the specious view that the law has no variation for men and women, yet he felt that no one who had violated the law in any part could rebuke his fellow-sinner, and, therefore, remained obstinately silent. Mrs. Vernon had encountered this obstacle before, but it made the situation rather easier for her, as she never contradicted anything she said. After a moment or two she spoke again.

"It is a curious thing that these people like Senator March, who have never been tempted, put all poor sinners in the wrong. I feel it every morning when I am with him. I never had this feeling with Guy Vernon, because from the day I married him his wickedness and his weakness were plain to me. But there is a compelling honesty about a man like Senator March from which one can't get away. It is like my father's. Senator March thinks I am marrying him for love; you think I am marrying him for money. This last is true and I can't deny it. But I also have a disinterested motive—it will make my father happy and put him at ease concerning me. I have a good many debts of which my father knows nothing, and which he would pay, if he knew of them, with his last shilling. I couldn't keep them from him much longer and I dreaded to tell him. Now he is spared all that. I had the satisfaction of dealing honestly with Senator March when I told him I must still give a part of my life to my father. He kissed my hand, and told me he loved me the better because I loved my father so well."

Yes, it was the only redeeming love which Alicia Vernon had ever known, and it had in it a strange element of nobility and purity.

"I hope sincerely you may be happy," was all that Sir Percy Carlyon said.

"I don't know whether I wish you to be happy or not," Alicia replied in the same low voice.

"At least the past is now a closed book between us."

"Is the past ever a closed book? Certainly not to a woman. There are some things which are bloodstains upon the page of life, and sink through and through its pages until at the very last there is still a red stain. Anyway, I don't hate Senator March, and I don't take a party to my life to be as much as I can feel for any man now, but I could chop him to pieces for my father's sake or for—"

The sentence remained unfinished.

Alicia's wild, unrevering passion, mingled with avenging, regret, and chagrin, died hard. There had never been a moment in which she would not have considered a marriage with Sir Percy Carlyon as imprudent and even disastrous. But there had never been a moment, not even the present, when she would not have rushed into this joyous madness. She turned and walked up and down the room once or twice, saddened, as all sentient beings are, when looking down an abyss in which they long to throw themselves, struggling fiercely, against the restraining hand. Sir Percy, quiet immovable, stood in the same place until Alicia turned toward him and spoke in her usual, quiet tones.

"But I have this to say to you: If, after you are married, you assume that your wife is too good to breathe the same air with me, you may expect me to resent it. We may be in Washington together, remember, for some time,

and if I am unjustly treated there will be a catastrophe, and this you may count upon."

Just then Gen. Talbott's bedroom door opened and he walked in.

"The ten minutes are up," he said; "now sit down, Carlyon, and let us talk about coming events. Alicia and I will call to see Miss Armistage to-morrow, taking the privilege of old friends."

"Thank you," said Sir Percy, and could not force himself to say more.

"How strangely things fall out," continued the general pleasantly. "I had no thought when I came to Washington that I should leave Alicia behind me. You won't leave me for long, papa."

"You must know, because I know in three months I shall ask Senator March to take me to England and then we will bring you back."

"Oh, yes!" replied Gen. Talbott, smiling, "there will be an eternal fetching and carrying, and some day I shall be a rickety old fellow; then you and March will probably throw me over."

Alicia only answered him with a look which was eloquent.

"Gen. Talbott did not think Sir Percy's visit a waste of time, and he is not likely to be talked under such circumstances, so Gen. Talbott, full of sympathy and kindness, kept on:

"After leaving me Miss Armistage, my dear fellow, one can safely congratulate you. The newspapers say the wedding comes off the middle of June."

"The newspapers are right for once," answered Sir Percy. "The wedding is to take place in Kentucky, so I am afraid I shall have the pleasure of Mrs. Vernon's presence and yours."

"No; we shall have our own affairs to attend to at that time. We are to be married ourselves, you know," answered Gen. Talbott, laughing, and then Sir Percy said good-by and went out.

When he was gone Gen. Talbott said to his daughter:

"Miss Armistage is indeed a charming girl. It is a pity she has not fortune and prestige such as Miss Chantrey has, and fortune and prestige are what Carlyon needs in a wife."

Alicia Vernon made no reply, and Gen. Talbott, taking up a batch of newly arrived English newspapers, retired to his own room to read them.

Alicia Vernon, lying back in the depths of a deep armchair, sat quite still, looking straight before her. From the street below came the din of voices, of traffic; outside her window black and white sparrows were wheeling and chattering, and a linden tree in full leaf close by the broad window waved softly in the breeze, making delicate green shadows pass over the room and Alicia's face.

The phase of existence on which she had entered was as strange to her as if it were that of another planet. Senator March's offer of marriage had not taken her by surprise, she had seen it coming for weeks and had made up her mind from the first to accept it. Nevertheless, when it came she was overwhelmed with the strangeness of her new position. Of all those who had ever made love to her, she was the first man who believed her to be the soul of truth and purity. It produced in her a faint stirring of a wish to be a little like Roger March thought her to be. If only she could put Sir Percy Carlyon out of her mind for a moment, when he came to tell her of his engagement to another woman, had agitated her more than Senator March had been able to do, even in the moment of asking her to marry.

Suddenly the door opened, and a boy ushered in the person farthest from Alicia Vernon's mind at that moment—Nicholas Colegrove. His personality was so strong that he could not come and go anywhere without making her feel his presence, when he came to tell her of his engagement to another woman, had agitated her more than Senator March had been able to do, even in the moment of asking her to marry.

"I took the liberty of a friend, albeit a new one, in coming to offer you my felicitations on what I heard this morning," Alicia Vernon, now quite herself, smiled and thanked him prettily and asked him to be seated.

"Marriage is a very different thing between men and women and between boys and girls," he said in a tone of good-natured cynicism. "When a young man and woman marry, I have often noticed they assume a defensive attitude, one to the other; it is best in the long run. Of course, they don't admit—everybody in this blessed country is on the basis of the thing in the sentiment—but it is a fact just the same."

Alicia smiled and answered:

"I don't think that American men have ever been on the defensive with women."

"Quite true in a way," answered Colegrove. "My interest in the subject is purely academic. I was married at nineteen to a pink-cheeked girl three years older than myself. We found out our mistake at the end of a few years. I am not a brute, and I am willing to give her everything she wants, but she doesn't want what she wants. Sometimes she thinks it's a divorce she wants, but as soon as I agree to it she finds out that she doesn't want it at all. Of course," continued Colegrove, rising and walking about the room, "the time may come when I shall meet a woman who will mean a good deal to me. So far, however, not one of them has been able to make any impression on me as deep as the action of the board of directors of the A. F. & O. R. If you don't mind, however, now that it is too late, I was very much impressed by you. Your type, you know, is very unusual."

Yes, Alicia Vernon knew that her type was very unusual, and never in her life had her pride and self-love been more flattered than by Colegrove's frank and debonair admission.

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fiancee of Sir Percy Carlyon. Luckily Lucy was not at home, for which mercy Mrs. Vereker was humbly thankful. The visit, however, had to be returned, and within the week Mrs. Armistage and Lucy drove in a hired carriage to the British Embassy and were shown into the drawing-room. Never was there a meeting with greater elements of danger. Besides Mrs. Vereker and the three girls, they had Gen. Talbott, Alicia Vernon, and Senator March. It was enough to disconcert a trained woman of the world, but Lucy Armistage, with the natural tact and self-control which was her heritage, bore herself beautifully. She had long since divined that the three Vereker girls followed their mother as if she were a bell-cow, while Lord Baudesert was the supreme arbiter of their destinies. Lucy took up the best possible strategic position—a chair next to Lord Baudesert. The ambassador, in spite of his tendency to harass his womenkind, was a gentleman, and while cursing Lucy from the bottom of his heart, treated her with courtesy and attention. Something in the softness of her manner and the fearlessness of her eyes struck Lord Baudesert with a sneaking admiration. Lucy Armistage had neither great beauty, great talents, nor great fortune, but she was a conqueror of hearts, and her empire was over men. No man had ever withstood her charm when she deliberately chose to exercise it. On this occasion she proceeded with infinite tact to captivate Lord Baudesert. Sir Percy, secretly diverted in spite of himself, watched Lucy serenely walking into the good graces of the ambassador, and that by a path which few had courage to tread, the path of polite dissimulation with him. Mrs. Vereker turned pale when she heard Lucy say, smilingly, to Lord Baudesert concerning a certain public question then under discussion:

"I speak with much ignorance and more prejudice, but just the same I can't agree with you."

And Lord Baudesert, instead of eating her up in two mouthfuls on the spot, answered amiably:

"My dear young lady, you are no more out of ten who have discussed it."

Then Lucy told him, with quiet droolery, of her own views and opinions of the subject and the various others which she had heard expressed by the public men who discussed it, and Lord Baudesert laughed with appreciation. And then they found a book or two in common, and Lord Baudesert made the amazing discovery that a girl might browse about in a library and get hold of interesting odds and ends of knowledge, which she knew how to use without pedantry or affectation. Lucy's information about the Indian mutiny was a mine of gold to her. Lord Baudesert had been a cornet in the days when there were still cornets, and had been both at Delhi and Lucknow, and seen upon the breast of his court costume the medal of the Alleghur, which he would not have exchanged for the blue ribbon of the Garter. Lucy was the first woman he had met in America who even knew the date of the mutiny, and Lord Baudesert, therefore, soon reckoned her above and beyond the rest of the nation.

The visit was to Lucy a little triumph of her own, which was not lost upon any one present, and least of all Alicia Vernon. The manner between the two women was perfect. Lucy had not forgotten Sir Percy Carlyon's word of warning. She knew not why he had no desire for her to be intimate with Mrs. Vernon, but his wishes were respected. Each was carefully polite to the other, and the little shade of reserve was too delicate to be noticed by any one present except Sir Percy Carlyon. Senator March did not know of it, but he was up to Lucy as she was leaving, and said in a low voice:

"I hope that you and Mrs. Vernon will become great friends. I owe Sir Percy a debt of gratitude. It was through him, you know, I met Mrs. Vernon."

"Thank you," replied Lucy. "Sir Percy is always laying people under obligations to him," and she turned away smiling.

When, after a short visit, Mrs. Armistage left the embassy, Lord Baudesert tried to pin Lucy down. Lucy stayed a little longer, but not even Lord Baudesert's blandishments made her commit the blunder of saying too long.

Lord Baudesert's first remark on finding himself alone in the bosom of his family was to Mrs. Vereker:

"Have her to dinner as soon as you can. Delightful girl she is. After all, perhaps, Percy didn't make any blunder in marrying her. She is just what I need. A Chinese mandarin, and sly; she had been shaking her head and sighing ever since the engagement was announced."

The dinner two weeks later was an affair of great importance. Sir Percy Armistage had expected her to be frightened out of her wits at the thought of sitting next Lord Baudesert during the whole of the dinner, and he could not quite bring himself to believe in her calm courage was not foolhardiness. But where men were concerned, Lucy Armistage knew what to say and do as well as any woman that ever lived. As she sat next to Lord Baudesert at the long glittering dinner table, she talked with him so prettily, controlling her natural effervescence, but occasionally sparkling into brilliance, that Lord Baudesert found himself captivated as he had never been before in his life.

Senator March and Alicia Vernon were present also; it seemed to Sir Percy as if the fates were still at their terrible work between Alicia Vernon and him.

Mrs. Vereker was sadly polite to Lucy, wondering all the time how Lord Baudesert could be so delighted with her obviously. When the last guests had departed, Lord Baudesert, standing in front of the fire in the hereditary attitude of the Englishman, with his feet wide apart and his hands behind his back, remarked coolly:

"I think, Susan, when you go home this summer, you may as well arrange to remain during the winter. I intend to take the future Lady Carlyon in hand and she is a few things, and I can't do it as well with you here. I shall ask her to reside here."

Mrs. Vereker gasped. The intimation was not wholly displeasing to her after three years of lonely life at Bardston, but the idea of an American woman doing the honors of Lord Baudesert's embassy was enough to stagger anybody, certainly a person so easily staggered as Mrs. Vereker.

On Lucy's morning in a small church in Bardston, Ky., Lucy Armistage became Lady Carlyon. It was the simplest little wedding imaginable, without any token that Lucy was making a splendid marriage. She was a charming and unaffected bride and looked all apprehensive. Sir Percy, however, after the manner of an Englishman who had attained his heart's desire, was silent, and looked somewhat bowed.

On the following day, at a fashionable church in Washington, Alicia Vernon became Alicia March. The first news she heard of Sir Percy Carlyon was that he was promoted and appointed minister at a small continental court. Thus Lady Carlyon and Mrs. March had separate orbits many thousands miles apart.

TO BE CONTINUED TO-MORROW.

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